"How in This Cruel Age I Celebrated Freedom": Aesopian Subversion in Nikolai Ulyanov's Painting for the 1937 Pushkin Centenary

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“How in This Cruel Age I Celebrated Freedom”: Aesopian Subversion in Nikolai Ulyanov’s Painting for the 1937 Pushkin Centenary

Annilyn Marie Spjut

A thesis submitted to the faculty of Brigham Young University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

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Painted in 1937 as part of the centenary celebration of the death of Alexander Pushkin, Nikolai Ulyanov’s *A. S. Pushkin and his Wife, N. N. Pushkina at the Imperial Ball* has been lauded as the quintessential example of Soviet history painting. Modern scholars have followed the lead of Soviet critics, who praised the painting for its insight into the psychology of the brilliant poet repressed by the tyrannical tsarist regime. According to this interpretation, Soviet viewers in the 1930s were to ponder on the tragedy of Pushkin’s demise and rejoice that the victory of Socialism had freed them from such repression. However, this thesis suggests that Ulyanov embedded a secondary, subversive message in his masterpiece. Through careful manipulation of Pushkin’s complex semiotic significance, Socialist Realist dialectics, and the Aesopian method, Ulyanov crafted an image that could be celebrated for its adherence to Soviet ideology, while simultaneously suggesting to those who detected his clues that artistic repression had not ended with the revolution. In this subversive reading, Ulyanov’s masterwork becomes a psychological self-portrait of an artist living under Stalinist oppression during the Great Terror.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis would not have been possible without the help of so many. I would like to thank my patient advisors, Martha M. Peacock and James Swensen, who believed in me and cheered me on even when I doubted my abilities. I am also very grateful for Andrea Christensen and all the help and encouragement she gave me. I would also like to acknowledge the support of the FLAS program, which enabled me to improve my knowledge of the Russian language and my understanding of Russian culture. I was particularly blessed to be able to increase my familiarity with Russian literature, as I studied the novels of Dostoevsky with Michael Kelly, who helped further hone my thesis.

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DEDICATION

To my mother, Mary Ann Schill, who taught me a love of art and literature

and

To my son, Lev Aleksandr Spjut, to whom I hope to pass on that same passion
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Я памятник себе воздвиг нерукотворный,
К нему не зарастет народная тропа,
Вознесся выше он главою непокорной
Александрийского столпа.

Нет, весь я не умру — душа в заветной лире
Мой прах переживет и тленья убежит —
И славен буду я, доколь в подлунном мире
Жив будет хоть один пиит.

Слух обо мне пройдет по всей Руси великой,
И назовет меня всяк сущий в ней язык,
И гордый внук славян, и финн, и ныне дикой
Тунгуз, и друг степей калмык.

И долго буду тем любезен я народу,
Что чувства добрые я лирой пробуждал,
Что в мой жестокой век восславил я Свободу
И милость к падшим призывал.

Веленью божию, о музу, будь послушна,
Обиды не страшась, не требуя венца,
Хвалу и клевету приемли равнодушно,
И не оспаривай глупца.

-Александр Пушкин, 1836г

Exegi monumentum
Unto myself I reared a monument not builded
By hands; a track thereto the people’s feet will tread;
Not Alexander’s shaft is lofty as my pillar
That proudly lifts its splendid head.

Not wholly shall I die— but in the lyre my spirit
Shall, incorruptible and bodiless, survive—
And I shall know renown as long as under heaven
One poet yet remains alive.

The rumor of my fame will sweep through vasty Russia
And all its peoples speak this name, whose light shall reign
Alike for haughty Slav and Finn, and savage Tungus
And Kalmuck riders of the plain.

I shall be loved, and long the people will remember

The kindly thoughts that I stirred—my music’s brightest crown,
How in this cruel age I celebrated freedom,
And begged for truth toward those cast down.

Oh, Muse, as ever, now obey your God’s commandments,
Of insult unafraid, to praise and slander cool,
Demanding no reward, sing on, but in your wisdom
Be silent when you meet a fool.
-Alexander Pushkin, 1836

INTRODUCTION

In 1937, as Socialist Realism reached monolithic status and in the midst of the purges of the Great Terror, the Soviet Union celebrated the hundredth anniversary of the death of the great Russian poet Alexander Pushkin. The centenary celebrations sought to invite the Soviet intelligentsia to once again engage with Soviet culture in a way they had not since the beginning of the Great Retreat in the late 1920s, when many of the more liberal and experimental artists, writers, and thinkers had fled the country in fear of the purges, new restrictions, and censorship. Plays, poems, and artworks paying homage to Pushkin were produced in great numbers, as well as a plethora of new scholarship on the poet.

Few of the artistic products received as great acclaim as Nikolai Ulyanov’s *A. S. Pushkin and his Wife, N. N. Pushkina, at the Imperial Ball* (figure 1). This monumental painting was lauded for its portrayal of the poet’s psychology, despite detractors claiming the artist had failed to capture the likeness of Pushkin. Since its unveiling for the centenary, Ulyanov’s painting has been celebrated as one of the most iconic paintings of Pushkin and has appeared beside Orest

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2 Aleksandr Sergeevich Pushkin. *The Poems, Prose and Plays of Alexander Pushkin*. Edited by Avraham Yarmolinsky (New York: Modern Library, 1936), 88. This translation was chosen because it was done for the 1937 Pushkin centenary. However, some lines are problematic, particularly the second line. Pushkin’s original line, which states that the people’s path to the monument will not be overgrown, is phrased in such a way as to imply that this is because such a path will not exist since there is no physical monument. Avraham Yarmolinsky’s translation flips this sentiment on its head by implying that the path will exist. A better translation is Philip Nikolayev’s which says, “The people’s path to it will ne’er be overgrown.” Philip Nikolayev, “Pushkin Poems, Mandelshtam Poems,” *The Battersea Review*, October 31, 2015, accessed January 2017, http://thebatterseareview.com/poems/145-alexander-pushkin-and-osip-mandelshtam.
Kiprensky and Vasily Tropinin’s portraits (figures 2 and 3) as one of the canonical images of the poet. Yet, this image, unlike Kiprensky and Tropinin’s nineteenth-century paintings, was painted a hundred years after the poet’s death, and rather than offering a purely naturalistic bust of the poet, gives a highly-interpreted view, reflecting how Pushkin’s likeness has accumulated semiotic meaning in the hundred-year interim.

Though a famed portraitist, Ulyanov chose not to depict Pushkin in the traditional portrait composition established by Kiprensky and Tropinin; instead while he keeps the focus on Pushkin, Ulyanov depicts a multi-figural, historical scene. Ulyanov replaces the relatively somber palette and tight brushwork of the nineteenth-century works, with vibrant, even garish colors and bold, painterly brush strokes. Pushkin stands arm-in-arm with his wife facing a mirror, where members of the imperial court are depicted assembled on the parade staircase of the Anichov Palace. Many of the resplendent aristocrats turn to gaze down at the arriving couple. While Natalya Pushkina admires her reflection, Pushkin turns his face from the mirror to gaze out at the viewer. While such huge, multi-figural paintings are common in Socialist Realist painting in the 1930s, Ulyanov’s work deviates from the norms of the time in many ways; the vibrant pink color palette, the choppy brushwork, and the depiction of Tsarist opulence are peculiar in Stalinist painting. Yet while Ulyanov seems to break with many of the stylistic customs of Socialist Realism, Soviet critics praised this work, and it has been celebrated for decades as the quintessential example of Soviet history painting.

This thesis critically examines this image as a cultural artifact of both the cultural milieu of the Soviet era and the individual artist’s feelings at the time, in order to reveal how the relative freedom afforded by history painting allowed the artist to engage in a subversive discourse against the hegemony of the Socialist state. By employing the Aesopian method, Ulyanov
appeals to the national cult of Pushkin to present a very appropriate Soviet message, while subversively critiquing the censored and confined position of the artist in the Soviet Union. Consequently, this thesis examines the duality of the messages in *A. S. Pushkin and N. N. Pushkina at the Imperial Ball* as a unique instance of artistic expression and as emblematic of many Soviet artists’ efforts to subvert hegemonic messages while working within the dominant style of Socialist Realism.

While *Pushkin and his Wife at the Ball* is one of the most oft cited examples of history painting in the Soviet Union, scholarship on this piece has been relatively superficial. The painting is usually briefly referenced in overviews of Soviet art to demonstrate that history painting continued under Soviet patronage. While breaking markedly with typical Socialist Realist pieces depicting smiling peasants or sweating factory workers, this image of the imperial splendor of the Nikolaevan court is lauded as a triumph of Socialist Realist painting. This builds upon the praise accorded Ulyanov’s piece at its initial unveiling for the All-Union Pushkin Exhibition. In typical Soviet style, critics at the time declared Ulyanov’s work one of the most successful of the exhibition because of the ideological merits of the piece. While some remarked that Ulyanov had failed to replicate Pushkin’s true likeness, most reviewers applauded the artist for capturing the psychology of the poet as a type of “new Soviet man.” Reviewers praised how the menacing crowd on the stairs expressed the threat of such a classed society to enlightened individuals, such as Pushkin. One reviewer, Efros, described the tension between poet and aristocracy, when he characterized Ulyanov’s Pushkin as “tense, collected, on his guard, ready to be rebuffed and attacked in this hated circle of people.” Yet, this thesis discusses how this same tension between the individual and society, which was so highly valued in Soviet history

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3 The painting will hereafter be referred to as *Pushkin and his Wife at the Ball*
painting, could also have subversive implications. This asserts that an artist could successfully work within the confines of the Socialist Realist style while subverting the totalizing effects of the ideology and style.

The idea of a dissident artist working within the dominant Soviet style challenges the traditional categorization of Soviet artists as either devotees of Socialist Realism or nonconformists. Those artists who embraced Socialist Realism by joining the USSR Union of Artists, which was established in 1932, have often been described as recreants, who abandoned artistic pursuits in favor of lucrative jobs producing propagandistic kitsch. On the other hand,

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American and Western European scholars have traditionally lauded the works of nonconformists or dissident artists who rejected Soviet aesthetic prescriptions in favor of their own artistic view. While much has been written about the experimental modernists driven from the Soviet Union in the 1920s, a paucity of scholarship on nonconformist artists from the Stalinist era seems to suggest that the extreme repression of the 1930s and 1940s effectively quelled all artistic subversion. Soviet art historians asserted that Soviet artists became convinced of the folly of European Modernism and willingly renounced their earlier “decadence” in favor of Socialist Realism. Meanwhile American and Western European scholars purport that artists were brainwashed, driven into exile, or executed in the purges, leaving behind only those willing to conform entirely. According to this view, Nonconformist artists did not reappear until the secret art shows that began under Khrushchev’s Thaw in the 1950s.

In this thesis, I propose that the tendencies toward experimentation and dissidence were not obliterated by Stalinist repression. Instead, frustrated artists, such as Ulyanov, found subtle ways to express themselves and subvert the dominant discourse while maintaining the

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7 Soviet Art historians had a much different approach to art history generally and in particular to Socialist Realism. Socialist Realism was not only the official style of the art, but also the critical approach required of Soviet scholars, officially until the end of the Soviet Union. Here are a few key texts offering the Soviet perspective Р. Я. Аблина, Б. В. Веймари, Е. М. Костина, О. И. Сопинский, and Н. И. Шантыко. *Советское Изобразительное Искусство* (Москва: Искусство, 1977); Iliia Dorontchenkov and Nina Gurianova, eds. *Russian and Soviet Views of Modern Western Art 1890s to Mid-1930s.* Translated by Charles Rougle (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009); Mikhail, L. Guerman, Vostretsova, and Vladimir Leniashin. *Soviet Art 1920s-1930s: Russian Museum, Leningrad* (Moskva: Sovjetskij Hudóznik, 1989); В. А. Юдинчев, csp. *Изобразительное Искусство Автономных Республик РСФСР.* Edited by Н. В. Черкасова. (Ленинград: Художник РСФСР, 1973); Игор Э. Грабар and В. С. Кеменов. *История Русского Искусства* (Москва: Издательство Академии Наук СССР, 1961).
appearance of working within the confines of the ideological and stylistic prescriptions. This paper does not intend to diminish or ignore the realities of the artistic repression in the Soviet Union but wishes to invite a reexamination of the tools and opportunities available to artists who wished to express an individualist view within the totalitarian state. This approach engages with recent studies in Soviet history and literature which contend that the Soviet cultural and political machine was not as totalizing as previously thought, and that subversion within the Soviet apparatus was more common than the traditional view suggests.8 By applying literary theory to Ulyanov’s painting, this thesis uncovers a previously undiscovered subversive reading to this relatively famous Soviet work.

Very little specific research has been done on Pushkin and his Wife at the Ball. Previous descriptions of the work have focused on Pushkin and his wife and described the members of the court merely as a crowd of onlookers. But while some of the figures are roughly sketched out with obscured faces, four figures on the stairs have very clearly defined faces. By comparing the faces depicted to images of Pushkin’s contemporaries, it becomes clear that Ulyanov is not simply depicting a throng of aristocracy, but is referencing specific people. The identities of these four previously unidentified figures exposes a deeper meaning to this painting, by highlighting Ulyanov’s genius in portraying Pushkin’s death in a Soviet context.

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While scholars, such as Matthew Cullerne Bown, have recognized Ulyanov’s genius in portraying Pushkin as a “New Soviet Person…engaged in struggle,” analysis of the painting has not been deep enough to identify how Ulyanov’s depiction of the dialectics of Socialist Realism helped him to create such an ideological appropriate piece of Soviet art. By applying Katerina Clark’s literary analysis of the individual/society dialectic, it becomes clear how Ulyanov’s piece could be celebrated as the paragon of Soviet history painting. Ulyanov’s painting is an image of struggle. However while censors and critics saw only a historical struggle, Ulyanov left clues that this was not the only reading. I assert that Ulyanov, who had associated with authors and dramaturges would have been aware of and availed himself of the Aesopian method, a Russian literary convention for encrypting unacceptable messages in historical works. Because of the Soviet’s unique and complicated relationship with chronological time, Ulyanov could conceal his subversive message by depicting what was considered an innocuous historical scene of struggle. But to those who detected his clues, it would have become apparent that the represented struggle of the repressed artist was not merely a historical phenomenon, but a contemporary issue.

But Ulyanov does not use just any historical scene of struggle, he embeds his subversive commentary in an image of Pushkin. Not only did this give him the opportunity to engage with the centenary celebrations of 1937, but Ulyanov was able to use the complex semiotic significance of Pushkin as both a collectively revered figure and as a personal idol to reflect the duality of his messages. *Pushkin and his Wife at the Ball* was praised because it expressed so effectively prevailing interpretations of Pushkin’s death, but the artist simultaneous drew a

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parallel between Pushkin’s repression at the Tsar’s hand and his own experience under Stalin’s regime.

Yet, while I believe that Ulyanov painted *Pushkin and his Wife at the Ball* in order to communicate a subversive message, he was in no way a nonconformist. Ulyanov actively strove to conform to Soviet expectations and sought the approval of Soviet ideologues. He carefully concealed his dissidence in a painting that simultaneously communicated the ideal Soviet piece. Thus, explorations of identity formation, self-fashioning, performative identity all play a role in the theoretical underpinnings of this thesis as Ulyanov’s example reveals the effects of both the external forces of the superstructure which mold the individual from without and the internal forces of individual identity which seek to exert themselves against the superstructure.

Foucauldian discourse analysis and Clement Greenblatt’s notions of self-fashioning allow for an investigation into Ulyanov’s conformance to the dominant discourse. Yet, as Greenblatt expressed in the conclusion of his book, his discoveries disturbed him, for they seemed to deny autonomy.\(^1\) I assert the existence of free will in Ulyanov’s self-fashioning, and rely on Goffman’s model of impression management to argue that by skillful negotiation of the presented self, Ulyanov could self-fashion in order to participate in the dominant ideology while simultaneously preserving a sense of independent self that subverted the dominant discourse.\(^2\)

Ulyanov’s biography clearly demonstrates how he, a theater worker and portrait painter, well aware of the methods of self-presentation, negotiated the Terror of the 1930s by self-fashioning into a model Soviet artist by rewriting his own biography to more closely conform to the ideal of the Soviet artist. While he did not change the essential facts of his life, Ulyanov’s memoires,

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written in the 1930s, emphasized those characteristics that were most desirable in the Soviet system and expunged or disguised those aspects that could be seen as questionable. The majority of scholarship has accepted Ulyanov’s version of his biography as simple fact, but this view ignores the way the artist tailored his memoirs to fit the ideal model of the Soviet artist. His revision of his own biography demonstrates Ulyanov’s comprehension of Soviet ideological prescriptions and his ability to confound the system in order to present an acceptable message, while artfully concealing undesirable elements. Previous scholarship has failed to uncover the subversive nature of *Pushkin and his Wife at the Ball*, in part because too many scholars have unquestionably accepted the image Ulyanov presented of himself as the quintessential Soviet artist. However by reconsidering Ulyanov’s biography, one uncovers the price he paid to conform and how that bred the dissatisfaction with the Soviet system he expresses in *Pushkin and his Wife at the Ball*.

NIKOLAI PAVLOVICH ULYANOV: BIOGRAPHY OF THE ARTIST

Soviet accounts of Ulyanov’s childhood stressed the artist’s peasant origins by describing how his parents, released from serfdom only fifteen years before his birth in 1877 and still struggling against the poverty that afflicted most peasant households under the Tsarist regime, recognized Ulyanov’s talents and sought to give him the best advantages their meager means could provide.13 There were not many opportunities for an aspiring artist in the Ulyanov’s

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hometown of Yelets, so through great sacrifice, his father arranged an apprenticeship at an icon-painting studio in Moscow—the best artistic opportunity that could be afforded the son of a peasant at the time. In his memoirs, Ulyanov recounted how he would have been forced to accept a life of dull religious icon copying, if not for the artist Vasily Nikitich Meshkov, who adopted the thirteen-year-old artist and helped him gain admittance to the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture.14 Ulyanov’s peasant origins and his story of young talent nearly squandered because of poverty would have resonated with Soviet ideologues in the 1930s who were actively recruiting artists from the peasant class, in order to support claims that the talent of Vasily Tropinin (1776-1857) would never have been squandered under the Soviets as it had been under the Tsarist regime.15 Peasants, as artists, writers, and scholars, were to make up the new intelligentsia prescribed by Stalin; those who already had this genealogy emphasized it to bolster their reputations.16

Descriptions of Ulyanov’s time in the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture emphasized his rejection of the formalist teachers in order to follow the naturalist principles taught by Valentin Serov. Serov, a portraitist posthumously celebrated by Soviet policy makers, shared commissions he received with Ulyanov and eventually gave Ulyanov his studio. While later Soviet accounts often portrayed Ulyanov as a faithful disciple of the celebrated Serov, Muratov’s account of the artist’s life, published in the 1920s before the full

14Ульянов, Встречи и Воспоминания. 58.
15 Vasily Tropinin was a contemporary of Pushkin, who was born a serf. He demonstrated artistic talent at a young age, but after a few years of schooling, his master recalled him to work as a lackey on the family estate. Tropinin was not able to return to painting for over twenty years, until he gained his freedom in 1823. Among Soviet cultural ideologues, his story was seen as the perfect parable for Tsarist repressions, which demonstrated the successes of the new Soviet system, where every citizen’s talent was to be recognized and cultivated.
16 Ulyanov was not the only artist to play up peasant origins to curry favor with the new regime. Alexander Gerasimov who served as president of the Artist’s Union, was famous for dressing in peasant clothing and bragging of sleeping on a pile of straw in his studio because it reminded him of his peasant roots. Bown, Socialist Realist Painting. 98.
swell of Stalinist repression, stated that Ulyanov felt restrained in Serov’s shadow and argues that while portraits were a lucrative genre, Ulyanov felt that they limited his artistic expression. Pavel Muratov, one of Ulyanov’s biographers and a personal friend of the artist, suggested that Serov’s death in 1911 freed Ulyanov and allowed for his exploration of European modernism.

Even before Serov’s death, however, Ulyanov had begun to experiment with less realistic forms of artistic expression. He traveled to Europe several times from 1907-1912, becoming acquainted with European modernist styles and artists and experimenting with elements of Cezannism and Futurism. About this same time, he abandoned strict naturalism and began to associate with the Blue Rose group, joining the artistic staff of their journal, “The Golden Fleece,” in 1907. At the same time, Ulyanov contributed to the art magazine, “Mir Iskusstva,” an early modernist magazine established by Sergei Diaghilev (1872-1929), the founder of the famous Ballets Russes. Both the Blue Rose Group and the Miriskusstvinki were part of the Russian Symbolist movement that dabbled in abstraction and focused on the theurgic process of viewing and creating art. Ulyanov’s writings on the artistic process as a semi-spiritual experience clearly indicated that, even years later, he still subscribed to many of the precepts of these Silver Age artistic movements.

Another central tenet of these Russian Symbolists was the interconnectivity of all the arts—particularly the visual arts, literature, and theater. From the early 1900s through the 1920s, Ulyanov not only painted in his studio, but was also involved with the theater, working as a decorator and costume designer for the experimental directors Konstantin Stanislavsky (1863-

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17 Муратов, Павел П. 1925. Никола́й Павлович Ульянов. Москва: Гос. Издво, 16.
18 Л. Л. Правоверовой, “Мой Пушкин.” Compiled by З. Ю. Буммаева. In Люди Эпохи Сумерек, by Николай Павлович Ульянов, 83-86. (Москва: Аграф, 2004) 14. This book is mainly a compilation of Ulyanov’s own writing on art, literature, music, and his associations with famous artistic figures of the Silver Age. In various essays compiled in this book, his language suggests that in the 19030s he still ascribed to many of the ideas of the Mirisskustniki, such as the interconnectivity of the arts and their spiritual nature.
1938) and Vsevolod Meyerhold (1874-1940). This era, as Muratov reported, was the happiest of Ulyanov’s life, for he loved his work in the theater and was surrounded by friends.¹⁹ Until Stalinist repressions began in the 1920s, Ulyanov’s studio was filled with students by day and intellectuals by night.²⁰ He was friends with many of the notable writers, philosophers, and theater workers of the Silver Age, as well as artists. But as repression of the intelligentsia increased through the 1920s, the majority of these friends, including Muratov, fled the country to more accepting intellectual environments in Germany and France.

Biographers have noted that descriptions of Nikolai Ulyanov seem to present the story of two completely different artists—the experimental, mystical artist who joined the Blue Rose Group and the staunch realist who never deviated from Serov’s footsteps.²¹ This latter view of the artist, Pravoverovoi argues, was the product of later Soviet ideologues redefining Ulyanov’s identity in the 1950s after his death in 1949, so that it more closely aligned with Socialist Realist ideology.²² I assert that Ulyanov himself fed the legends of “a realist, who was able to overcome the folly of a decadent youth,”²³ through careful self-fashioning beginning in 1929 when he joined the Association of Artists of the Revolution (AKhR),²⁴ the realist artist group that would form the core of the All-Russia Artist’s Union in 1932. Many have noted Ulyanov’s perceptivity, and I believe that by 1929, he could see the forthcoming ascendancy of the realist approach, and

¹⁹Муратов, 27.
²⁰Правоверовой, Люди Эпохи Сумерек, 6.
²¹Ibid, 5-6.
²²Ibid.
²³Ibid, 5.
²⁴In Russian, Ассоциация художников революции. Begun in 1922 as the Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia (AKhRR), this group changed its name to AKhR in 1928, just prior to Ulyanov’s joining. This group pitted itself against the avant-garde tendencies of the 1920. The group was officially disbanded in 1932 along with all other artistic associations, but in reality, AKhR had just transformed into the only acceptable artists’ group, the All-Russia Artist’s Union.
he began to ally himself with the proper people in order to ensure himself the best chance of success within the new system.

Further self-fashioning is apparent in the late 1920s, when he began work on his memoirs, *Meetings and Recollections*, which included reminiscences of famous artists he had known. This record of his life, which was not published in full until after his death, presents a very appropriate Soviet view of the artist’s life, stressing his peasant roots and ties to Serov, and it is from these memoirs that most Soviet biographers drew their inspiration to paint Ulyanov as the humble realist.

It seems that in response to the advent of Socialist Realism and the threat of Stalinist purges in the 1930s, Ulyanov composed his own personal narrative to portray himself as the ideal Soviet artist. Ulyanov’s desire to conform to the expectations of the regime was likely dually motivated by a desire for recognition of his work and a fear of the dreadful consequences of not adhering to the party line. To present a sense of self that was in line with the dominant political ideology, Ulyanov expunged from all his notebooks the names of acquaintances and statements of opinion which would have been damning under the new stringent dogma. As he continued to work on his memoirs through the 1930s, questionable figures like Muratov and Meyerhold, who had played great roles in Ulyanov’s life, were referred to only by veiled reference.25 Ulyanov’s efforts were rewarded when in 1932, the same year Socialist Realism became the national style, he received the title of Honored Artist of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic. This recognition and popularity, however, were relatively short

25 Pravoverovoi was the first to speak of Ulyanov’s efforts to conform to the Soviet ideal, but suggests that Ulyanov became reconciled to the fact that “the life of an artist is difficult regardless of what age he lives in” and did not resent the repression. I disagree and believe that he’s dissatisfaction becomes apparent even in that statement, for the Soviet Union was touting how the position of all citizens had become better under Socialism, so even for Ulyanov to suggest that artists in the Soviet era were as put upon by their patrons as by the aristocrats and bourgeois of former times, was subversive. Правоверовoi, 20.
lived; Ulyanov was nearly sixty years old, and his health was beginning to fail by this time. In 1933, he suffered a heart attack, which limited his ability to work; as a result he gave up theater work and returned to easel painting. He primarily painted historical figures like Napoleon’s *Ambassador Laurinston in the Tent of Kutuzov* (figure 4) and portraits of friends from recent history, such as in his portrait *K. S. Stanislavsky at Work* (figure 5), which won the Stalin Prize in 1948 ten years after the famous dramaturge’s death.

From 1935-1937, Ulyanov dedicated all his energies to giving life to the literary figure of Pushkin. For the 1937 Pushkin Centenary, he produced a series of Pushkin drawings as well as the large canvas, *Pushkin and his Wife at the Ball*. He would return to the Pushkin theme continuously until his death in 1949, even working through an alternate version of *Pushkin and his Wife at the Ball*, though this was never finished and is no longer extant.26 In his essay, “My Pushkin,” Ulyanov described how the end of Pushkin’s life held the most interest for him because he saw “a freedom loving personality, a poet of indomitable life force...tragically doomed” and haunted by “premonitions of death.”27 Having faced his own mortality just the year before he began serious work on the Pushkin, Ulyanov seems to have increasingly identified with Pushkin as a fellow artist despite the dramatic difference in situation.

**ULYANOV’S PUSHKIN: A UNIQUE VIEW OF THE POET**

Ulyanov asserted in his article, “My first pencil version of the picture *Pushkin with Wife before the Mirror* I completed in the summer of 1916...it was cold, raining, and somehow warmed with the warmth of the Pushkin theme, I began to sketch out the composition.”28 This original sketch is now lost, but other early sketches show the evolution of this composition. The

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26 This alternate image can be seen in the background of a late photograph of Ulyanov (figure 6).
27 Правоверовой, 84.
28 Ibid, 83.
first sketch with a positive date comes from 1927 (figure 7) and shows a more closely cropped image of Pushkin and his wife at the foot of the stairs looking into a mirror. By 1936, when Ulyanov was about to begin his work on the final piece, the main composition had not changed much, aside from zooming out to capture more of the scene and people surrounding Pushkin and his wife (figure 8). In the final version (figure 1), the composition changed only slightly to include both edges of the mirror and a few more figures.

In this image, Pushkin and his wife arrive at a court ball in the Anichkov Palace, owned by Emperor Nikolai I, which Pushkin is known to have attended. Alexander and Natalya Pushkin are shown from behind as they pause to look into the mirror. Natalya Pushkina, depicted accurately taller than her husband, admires her renowned beauty, while Pushkin himself turns away from the mirror to look out of the picture plane with his eyes level with the viewer’s. Meanwhile, the nobility of the court, assembled on the stairs and shown only as reflections in the mirror, look down haughtily at the couple entering the ball. The garish pink of the palace steps dominates the composition, while patches of a golden tone spread throughout the scene, fracture the space, and contribute a sense of movement, though all the figures stand solidly unmoving. The sketchiness of the paint, a certain muddiness of color despite the bright acid pink tone, and the strangeness of the space the couple inhabits produce a somewhat sinister feeling not found in other paintings of Pushkin. This painting deviates tremendously from what one might expect of a Soviet portrait of Pushkin, and in fact, it stands apart in a long history of Russian depictions of the poet.

Kiprensky’s and Tropinin’s portraits (figures 2 and 3), both painted in 1827, ten years before the poet’s death, were the defining paintings after which all subsequent likenesses were judged. Both depicted the poet looking off pensively in a three-quarter view in a traditional
portrait style with dark background and Romantic era dress. Ulyanov lauded these paintings in his essay “My Pushkin,” stating that he had studied these canonical works in order to understand the likeness and psychology of Pushkin to inform his own painting.29

Yet his painting did not share the contemplative psychology seen in other works inspired by these two well-known portraits. By the 1930s, these paintings, particularly the Kiprensky portrait, had been used for copy work by Russian artists for over a century and had often been reproduced in etchings. Even when not directly copying these works, later artists, creating their own images of Pushkin, drew heavily from the canon established by these two portraits. For example, Alexei Kravchenko, a contemporary of Ulyanov’s who studied with him at the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture and also worked with Mir Iskusstva, based his 1936 etching (Figure 9) for the centenary on Kiprensky’s painting. Kravchenko’s work cites Kiprensky’s portrait directly, ending up with the reverse image because of the nature of etching. Though he romanticizes the portrait by giving it more dramatic lighting and placing the scene outdoors with the addition of the moon, the tartan sash, folded arms, and even the statue in the background are immediately recognizable as features of the classic work. In contrast to this citational work, Ulyanov creates a completely new image of Pushkin, not found in any earlier works.

Though Ulyanov’s is more of a historical scene, the painting has often been characterized as a portrait because his self-fashioning as a humble disciple of Serov emphasized his work in portraiture. Under the Soviet system, portraiture was considered fairly innocuous as a genre, as

29 Ibid, 84.
long as the artist avoided painting political figures. Therefore by creating a persona as a portraitist, Ulyanov not only tied himself to Serov’s popularity, but also defined his artistic identity in a relatively safe sphere. Yet, *Pushkin and His Wife at the Ball* with its complex, multi-figural composition supersedes the general confines of portraiture and has more in common with genre scenes or history painting.

The generation of artists before Ulyanov, which included such monumental figures as Nikolai Ge and Ilya Repin, experimented with such depictions of scenes from Pushkin’s life. Repin’s work, *A. Pushkin in the Lyceum on January 8, 1815 Reads his Poem ‘Memories at Tsarskoe Selo’* from 1911 (figure 10), serves as an interesting comparison to Ulyanov’s piece. Repin’s painting is one of the few in the history of Pushkin portrayals, which, like Ulyanov’s, depicts Pushkin with ties to the imperial court, but both artists somewhat distance the poet from court life. Just as Ulyanov uses the frame of the mirror to separate the poet from the courtly figures, Repin keeps Pushkin aloof by placing him alone in the middle of the checkered floor. Both Ulyanov and Repin share a love of the dramatic and use the sumptuous decorations of the court to heighten the theatricality of their respective pieces. Repin, one of the socially-minded Peredvizhniki, whose style is often credited as the inspiration behind Socialist Realism, is blatantly dismissive of the aristocracy, making them look ridiculous as they swoon over the young poet’s masterful manipulation of language. Such overt didacticism was commonly used

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30 Several artists such as Pavel Korin and Mikhail Nesterov turned increasingly to portraiture as censorship in the Soviet Union became stricter. Soviet ideologues celebrated such conversions from religious or abstract painting to the generally realistic genre of portrait painting. Tretyakov gallery text.

31 Repin’s most famous Pushkin themed work, “Pushkin’s Farewell to the Sea” would actually fall under the category of portraiture. It was completed in tandem with Ivan Aivazovsky in 1887 and was soon added to the repertoire of canonical images of the poet. The composition and concept of depicting Pushkin by the sea was Aivazovsky’s idea, but this famous seascape painter knew his figural skills were not up to the task and invited Repin to assist him. This image was admired for its great sense of the Romantic sublime, which mirrored the feelings expressed in Pushkin’s poem, “Farewell to the Sea.”

32 Also known as the Itinerants or the Wanderers.
by the Peredvizhniki in their crusade against inequality and social injustice, and the architects of Socialist Realism embraced the clarity of this heavy-handed moralizing mode. Repin, along with the other Peredvizhniki, was held up by the Soviet regime as a paragon of Socialist Realism, and Soviet artists were commended to imitate his style and devotion to his cause. Yet, for all the similarities, Ulyanov refrained from mocking the aristocracy as Repin does in the Lyceum scene. Though a derisive approach to depicting the aristocracy would have been most appropriate under the Soviet regime, Ulyanov portrays them with regal comportment as they stand on the stairs. This stately appearance not only adds a somewhat imposing and disdainful tone as they gaze down at the poet, but it also allowed Ulyanov, a former member of the Miriskustniki, to revel in the grandiosity of Romantic era court life.

Despite the cramped space and garish colors, Ulyanov’s composition bespeaks the pomp and ceremony associated with court life. The regal, carpeted stairs, the footmen lining the hallways, and the gold gleaming on the military uniforms all indicate that Ulyanov is playing up the pageantry and ostentation of the Nikolaevan court not in mockery, but because he is enamored of this sense of presentation. Ulyanov himself declared that he was infatuated with this particular image of Pushkin at the ball because, “the era required some amount of splendor and elation of image.”33 The theatrical nature of the setting and the costumes speak to his time working in the theater, but they also seem to be a vestige from his association with the Miriskustniki,34 an art association begun by Diaghilev at the turn of the century.

Working with the magazine, Mir Iskusstva, which translates as World of Art, artists such as Boris Kustodiev, Eugene Lanceray, Leon Bakst, and Ivan Bilibin, reacted against the

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positivist tendencies of the Peredvizhniki and pushed for aesthetics over realism, adopting an art for art’s sake ideology that focused on capturing the feeling of a scene without assigning any social or political meaning. These artists looked to the past for inspiration, particularly embracing Rococo art, though they approached this eighteenth-century decadence with a wry humor that emphasized both the falsity and pretension of this great age of presentation; they were at once enamoured with the aesthetic spectacle, while recognizing it as merely a mask.

Eugene Lancray’s image, *Empress Elizabeth Petrovna in Tsarskoye Selo*, 1905, (figure 11) is a typical example of this style and shows many similarities with Ulyanov’s painting of Pushkin in its celebration of court life and its highly-researched portrayal of the costumes and setting. And in fact, Ulyanov’s earlier sketches for this painting show an even greater similarity. If Ulyanov did his first sketches for “Pushkin and his Wife at the Ball” in 1916 as he claimed, it would have been while he was still relatively close to his association with Mir Iskusstva. It seems likely that the idea of Pushkin in the ballroom, which would have seemed inimical to Soviet ideology and the views of Pushkin they were trying to promote, was born of this earlier artistic association in a less repressive time. Looking at his 1927 and 1935 sketches (figures 7 and 8), the sense of pageantry loved by the Miriskusstniki is evident, however the compositions are devoid of the suspicion and intrigue that pervade the final version. The tragedy of the image was part of its initial conception but was a later product of Ulyanov’s struggles and loneliness after his friends departed, as well as a consequence of Stalinist Terror which raged from 1936-1938. In his essay, “My Pushkin,” Ulyanov says, “My first Pushkin subject followed me for a long time, forcing me to find variations, to make additions and corrections, meditating on the details.”³⁵ The alterations in the sketches suggest that Ulyanov’s view of Pushkin changed over the years. This adjustment

³⁵ Ульянов, 84.
coincides with a Soviet reinvention of Pushkin’s cultural significance culminating in the 1937 celebration. Though Ulyanov’s personal interpretation contradicts the official, collective view of Pushkin that Soviet ideologues were trying to canonize, he carefully masks this subversive message by appealing to popular, contemporary views of Pushkin’s death. This duality of messaging is facilitated by the complexity of Pushkin’s semiotic significance as a cultural symbol rather than a historical person.

PUSHKIN AS SIGN

To understand the full complexity of Ulyanov’s message and its place within the Soviet system of the 1930s, one must understand the malleable nature of Pushkin as sign in the Russian collective consciousness, as well as some of Pushkin’s personal history. Stephanie Sandler’s book, *Commemorating Pushkin: Russia’s Myth of a National Poet*, which explores the complex evolution of the Pushkin myth since the poet’s death, suggests, “he was mourned as a symbol of Russia and as an immensely beloved friend…Pushkin has maintained his powerful hold on the Russian cultural imagination, because he has been able to be ‘our’ Pushkin as well as ‘my’ Pushkin.”36 This implies that the success of Pushkin as a cult figure arises from his duality as both a collectively-revered national figure, “our” Pushkin, and an individually-experienced figure, “my” Pushkin. Ulyanov activates both sides of this dichotomy to create a dual meaning in his work; the collectively held Pushkin rules over the Soviet sanctioned message and the personal “my Pushkin” represents the subversive, individual voice of the artist speaking out against the constraints of censorship. To understand how the artist accomplishes this task, one must understand briefly the biography of Pushkin as well as the history of his cultural

significance in the Russian collective consciousness and the various semiotic meanings attributed to him as a sign on both the collective and individual levels.

Alexander Sergeevich Pushkin was an aristocrat by birth, though born into an impoverished, old aristocratic family. The Pushkin family had been involved in court affairs since the days of Ivan the Terrible. His maternal line also had imperial connections through great-grandfather, Abram Petrovich Gannibal, who was a prominent member of the imperial court after having come to Russia as a slave from Africa. Pushkin often joked about his ugly African looks, though he was tremendously proud of his great-grandfather’s legacy. Alexander Sergeyevich was introduced to imperial society early in his life. He attended the Imperial Lyceum at Tsarskoe Selo, where he gave readings for the Tsar, as depicted in Repin’s painting. While there, he made friends with many of the young men who would participate in the Decembrist revolt of 1825.

By the time he graduated from the lyceum, Pushkin had achieved great fame as a poet, but his libertine politics and subversive poetry caused him to be exiled first to the Caucasus region and subsequently to his family estate at Mikhailovskoye. In 1825, Pushkin was still in exile during the Decembrist revolt, yet his friendship with many of the members of the movement and their possession of many of his early poems indirectly implicated Pushkin in the rebellion. Nevertheless, less than a year later, the new Tsar, Nikolai I, in a gesture of clemency, pardoned Pushkin of all his former crimes and invited him to return to the social life of the capital. Pushkin was enthused by the prospect of freedom, but soon discovered that the Tsar’s

37 T. J. Binyon, Pushkin: A Biography. (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 2002) Most of the biographical facts included in this essay, unless otherwise noted are taken from this biography, which is considered to be a definitive work on Pushkin’s life. Other books consulted include: Elaine Feinstein, Pushkin (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1998); Ю. М. Лотман, Пушкин (Санкт-Петербург: Искусство-СПБ,1995)
mercy was merely a commutation of his sentence rather than a full pardon. Forbidden to travel outside of Russia, Pushkin was also forced to submit all of his works to censorship either by the Tsar himself or his agent, Alexander von Benckendorff, the head of the Third Section. For the rest of his life, Pushkin would be watched by the Third Section, the secret police of Nikolai I’s day. Pushkin accepted this new life with gratitude, but his desire for freedom, particularly artistic freedom, often led to frustration and confrontation with Benckendorff.

A new period began in Pushkin’s life, when in 1831, he married Natalya Goncharova, purportedly one of the most beautiful women in Petersburg. In 1833, Pushkin received the military-court title of cadet at the Tsar’s behest. However, Pushkin was extremely offended by this honor, for the award was the lowest possible titled rank. He felt the award belittled his great cultural achievements as a writer and was only given to him so that his wife, a tremendous beauty and favorite of the Tsar, might fully participate in court life. Engagement with the court and the glittering society that inhabited the capital brought strife to the Pushkins’ marriage. Alexander Sergeevich became increasingly jealous of Natalya’s flirting and anxious over rising debts incurred to keep them both fashionably outfitted for life in the capital. He petitioned his wife several times to allow them to retire to the country for a simpler, cheaper life which would allow him more time for writing, but Natalya felt her resplendent charms were best displayed in lavish court appearances and would be utterly wasted on a country estate.

Natalya was indeed celebrated by Petersburg society. She and her sisters were known for always attracting a following of young men, usually army officers. In the summer of 1835, one young chevalier, George d’Anthes made her acquaintance and by that fall, he asserted they were

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madly in love. D’Anthes’ letters to his adopted father, Jacob van Heeckeren, the Dutch
ambassador suggest that early the next year, d’Anthes tried to seduce Natalya, but she rebuffed
him. D’Anthes, following advice from Heeckeren, tried to avoid Natalya’s company, so as to
avoid a scandal. Nevertheless, all of St. Petersbourg was aware of the liaison. Rumors of his
wife’s infidelity compounded Pushkin’s anguish over strained finances and his mother’s failing
health, but the summer passed without incident as d’Anthes kept his promise. By fall, however,
d’Anthes renewed his pursuit of Natalya, even as he began courting Natalya’s younger sister,
Yekaterina. He wrote to her several times imploring her to leave her husband, and even
orchestrated a meeting where he threatened suicide if she did not surrender to him; Natalya
continued to refuse him. Then, one day at the beginning of November, several of Pushkin’s
friends received letters addressed to the poet. The note impugned Pushkin’s honor, calling him
“the coadjutor to the Grand Master of the Order of the Cuckolds.”40 Pushkin approached his
wife, who recounted the details of her relationship with d’Anthes. Pushkin firmly believed in her
innocence and immediately challenged d’Anthes to a duel. Afraid of damaging his career,
Heeckeren convinced Pushkin to allow his son a two-week delay on the duel and used that time
to negotiate an engagement to Natalya’s younger sister, thereby providing an honorable end to
the affair. Yet, a week after his marriage, d’Anthes recommenced his outrageous behavior
towards Natalya. Pushkin wrote an insulting letter to Heeckeren, which was answered with a
cartel. The two met outside of town on February 8, 1837. Pushkin wounded d’Anthes’ arm,
while d’Anthes’ bullet punctured his stomach. Pushkin died two days later, on February 10.41

40 Binyon, 539.
41 The dates listed for Pushkin’s duel and death in the document are new style according to the Gregorian calendar. However, the dates are sometimes listed as January 27th and 29th according to the Julian calendar that was in use at the time. Russia switched to the Gregorian calendar at the end of January 1918 under the new Soviet regime. Thus, in 1937, the centenary celebrations took place in February according to the new style dates.
Because Alexander Pushkin had achieved such legendary status by the time of his death and was still seen as such an unpredictable and revolutionary figure, police and officers of the Third Section oversaw the funeral to prevent protests or riots. After the funeral, on the Tsar’s order, Pushkin’s body was taken out of the city secretly by night to be buried on his family’s estate in Boldino for fear of the crowds of mourners who would wish to pay their respects. Yet, the Tsar could not stem the stream of eulogies and lays written by intellectuals of the time, and the poet’s death was immediately viewed as a national tragedy.

The most famous of these was Lermontov’s “The Death of the Poet,” written while Pushkin lay dying. Lermontov was one of the first to suggest that court society was as much to blame for Pushkin’s death as d’Anthes’ bullet. This elegy asserted that Pushkin was “slandered by rumor” and pointed an accusing finger at “society, envious and stifling/ to a heart of free and fiery passions.” But the most condemning section was the last sixteen lines, which Lermontov added after the poet’s death, in which he indicted the court with the words, “You, standing by the throne in a rapacious throng,/ The executioners of Freedom, Genius, and Glory!” Lermontov suggested that divine vengeance would be visited on those elites who had killed Pushkin by spreading slanderous whispers and stifling his creative genius. While Benckendorff sought to silence this denunciation by exiling Lermontov to the Caucasus, handwritten copies of the poem had already been disseminated among many of Pushkin’s admirers, and this allegation of guilt would become a salient theme in many, later interpretations of Pushkin’s demise.

Beginning with writers such as Lermontov and Gogol, who had actually known Alexander Sergeevich, Pushkin was celebrated as the “embodiment of the Russian soul,” and

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43 Ibid, 89.
Russian literati began to look to him as their intellectual primogenitor. In 1880, this view drew grew Russian authors like Ivan Turgenev and Fyodor Dostoyevsky to the first Pushkin literary celebration. This three-day festival intensified the semiotic reinvention of Pushkin, giving him almost mystical associations and turning him into a signifier for many of the 26ntelligentsia’s aspirations for change in their country. One newspaper commentator, Vladimir Mikhnevich, remarked:

The issue here had nothing to do with the Turgenevs and the Dostoevskys and their speeches, and didn’t really have anything to do with Pushkin either. It had to do with the idea whose expression and personification [he] became in the eyes of the public, and in those unexpressed but universally clear—clearer in fact, than ever—those clearly felt social and intellectual strivings that were in the air.44

By participating in the celebration, Russian intellectuals were able, in a way, to bypass censorship by the authoritarian regime, in order to articulate a progressive vision for their class and their country; Pushkin became a rallying point for Russian intellectuals. 45 Dostoyevsky’s highly impassioned speech, in which he recited Pushkin’s poem “The Prophet,” set the tone for later commemorative events and established a prophetic style of discourse. Those eulogizing the poet invoked his oracular verse to claim Pushkin’s authority as they predicted Russia’s future.46

With these patterns of discourse established in 1880, each subsequent generation returned to pay homage to Pushkin as the source of all Russian artistry. With each celebration, lay, and elegy Pushkin acquired additional mythological clout; through this process, Pushkin was embedded into the national consciousness, not as a historical individual, but as a totem-like figure signifying the role of the artist and the intellectual in Russian society.

46 Sandler, 89.
Despite the Futurist poet, Vladimir Mayakovsky’s 1912 call to “throw Pushkin overboard from the boat of modernity,”47 neither the new century, nor the shifting political climate dimmed Pushkin’s semiotic potency, and he proved a very flexible icon of Russian culture in the early twentieth century. The Soviet era saw two iterations of Pushkin commemorative celebrations before the massive 1937 centenary.

At the 1921 celebration, the keynote speaker, the poet Alexander Blok, asserted that the memory of Pushkin could unite the warring factions of the Russian Civil War, but his death a few months later recolored the tenor of the celebration. His statement that “Pushkin had died from a lack of air” came to be seen as a presage of his own death and the repression of Soviet intellectuals of the 1920s.48

Just three years later, in 1924, for the 125th anniversary of Pushkin’s birth, Pushkin’s memory was again resurrected: this time not as a symbol of the intelligentsia, but as a champion of the oppressed proletariat, a forerunner to Lenin, and an ideal communist citizen.49 Supporters of traditional culture saw this opportunity to reassert Pushkin’s cultural primacy as a way of pushing back against the modernist impulses of the Futurists and Constructivists, but the new class of Proletarian poets’ had to be convinced to overlook Pushkin’s aristocratic heritage.

Lunacharsky, the People’s Commissar of Education lead the thrust by printing editorials emphasizing democratic sentiments in some of his poems. Other cultural leaders attempted to legitimize Pushkin by appealing to the authority of Soviet leaders, such as in the case of

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48 Ibid, 121.
Comrade Sosnovsky’s essay, “Why Lenin Loved Pushkin,” which highlighted the similarities between the poet and the revolutionary.\textsuperscript{50} Through rhetorical and psychological contortion, Pushkin was construed as the ideal “new Soviet man”–a model to be emulated by all Soviet citizens. This view of Pushkin as a harbinger of the Soviet system, as well as Blok’s assertion of Pushkin’s societal asphyxiation, fed into the dominant 1937 interpretation which stressed Pushkin’s mistreatment by the Tsarist regime and pointedly emphasized revolutionary sentiments in order to cast the poet as an exemplar for Soviet citizens.

The 1937 celebration in honor of the hundredth anniversary of the poet’s death is unique in the history of Pushkin celebrations because of its scope and its position at a critical moment in Soviet history. Though the period from 1936-1938 became known as the Great Terror, it could also be described as the height of Stalin’s power. This period begins with the ratification of the Stalin Constitution in 1936 and ends with the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939, when Stalin began to react against the threat of growing German power. In fact, the Great Terror, in which hundreds of thousands of Soviet citizens and party members were killed or exiled to Gulags, was a symptom of the power of Stalin’s personality cult as his personal paranoia began to infect the country.\textsuperscript{51} To lighten the feeling of terror, the leadership also encouraged mass celebrations, such as the Pushkin Centenary, to facilitate among the masses a feeling of collective identification with the state and an attitude of vigilance against the traitors and conspirators hunted by the

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid, 98.

\textsuperscript{51} Khrushchev famously blamed Stalin’s personality cult for the repression and deaths of the 1930s. He pointed out that while Stalin and his loyal followers claimed the deaths sought to pursue Trotskyite infiltrators, Trotskyites had never in actuality been much of a danger to the party line. Instead, Khrushchev asserted, the terror allowed Stalin to assert his power and dominance not only over the general population, but particularly over party leadership. Nikita S. Khrushchev, "The Secret Speech - On the Cult of Personality." <http://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1956khrushchev-secret1.html>, July 2015.
NKVD, the secret police of this era, and put on display in the show trials. To this end, the Pushkin Centenary was planned as a pan-Soviet celebration on a grand scale in hopes that Soviet citizens would unite behind a shared Russian, cultural heritage embodied by Alexander Pushkin.

For months preceding the celebration, newspapers printed articles on various Pushkin themes and the preparations underway for the anniversary. The glorious plans for the centenary included parades, art exhibitions, public readings, and the dedication of Pushkin monuments across the country. Key sites tied to the poet’s biography, such as his country estate at Boldino, were to be restored and opened to the public. There was an increased interest in Pushkiniana—the collected works of the poet, scholarship on them, and new creative works inspired by him. New translations of Pushkin’s works and scholarly commentaries on his oeuvre were to be published. Apartment buildings were encouraged to purchase paintings, busts, and reliefs of the poet for their lobbies and host community discussions in order to encourage residents to share their experiences at the various Pushkin-themed events. Everywhere busts of Pushkin were placed next to busts of Stalin and Lenin to give a sense of Party reciprocity with Pushkin’s works. As party leadership testified of Pushkin’s influence on their lives, newly educated

52 NKVD is an acronym signifying the People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs (Народный комиссариат внутренних дел). The NKVD operated from 1934 until it was dissolved in a restructuring of Soviet Commissariats in 1946. It is the predecessor of the more famous law enforcement agency, the KGB (Committee for State Security/Комитет государственной безопасности).


54 This celebration can be examined as part of the Russianizing campaign undertaken in the 1930s when Soviet leaders abandoned the multivocality of Leninist cultural policy, embodied in the phrase, “Nationalist in form, socialist in content,” in favor of a single Russian cultural ideal. Pushkin was celebrated as not only the father of Russian literature, but the forbearer of all Soviet culture. The native cultures of non-Russian, Soviet republics was repressed in favor of Russian culture. Russian language, music, literature, and art became the cultural touchstone, and the native cultures of countries like Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Georgia began to be regarded as primitive.

peasants celebrated the triumph of the Soviet system by reading Pushkin’s works; all Soviet citizens were expected to participate in this celebration of the poet’s greatness and also of the new political order.

One class of citizenry, however, was particularly targeted with this celebration. The 1937 celebration coincided with Stalin’s call for a new Soviet intelligentsia to take the place of the old, which had fled or been purged in the previous decade. The regime hoped that by inviting the remaining members of the intelligentsia to join in an official celebration of a literary figure, who already possessed totemic qualities for Russian intellectuals, they could facilitate rapprochement with this previously ostracized class. In theory, this reconciliation would be achieved through collective participation in semi-religious rites of homage to Pushkin such as the numerous Pushkin readings, scholarly lectures, and art exhibitions. Writers, artists, and thinkers, such as Ulyanov, who had not fled during the previous decade, were encouraged to join with the Soviet regime in creating and expanding the discourse by producing works dedicated to the Pushkin theme. And yet despite this welcoming invitation, strict censorship of all works was still enforced, compelling those who participated to follow certain ideological prescriptions in their creative pursuits.

As opposed to earlier celebrations, during the centenary, Pushkin was not celebrated as a member of the intellectual class. Instead, the ideological underpinnings of the 1937 conceptualization of Pushkin built on the rhetoric established in the earlier Soviet celebration of 1924. Pushkin’s exile, his friendship with the Decembrists, and his love for his peasant nurse

56 Ibid, 119.
57 In his book, Yuri Molok collects articles and statements from various Soviet intellectuals debating the relationship between art and Pushkin. Articles pose questions such as: What is the best kind of monument to Pushkin? What rules should be followed in depicting scenes from Pushkin’s works? What is the relationship of the modern man to Pushkin? This work shows how engaged some of these intellectuals were in the preparations for this celebration and how varied opinions could be at the time. Молок, Юрий. Пушкин в 1937 Году: Материалы и Исследования по Иконографии. Москва: Новое Литературное Обозрение, 2000.
were all highlighted. The poet was praised as a proto-revolutionary and champion of the proletariat. Most importantly as evinced in Ulyanov’s piece, the rhetoric describing the poet’s death changed to reflect contemporary political ideologies. The new, Soviet narrative implied that Pushkin was slain by a coterie of colluding traitors; this interpretation reflected the growing xenophobia and fear of Trotskyite infiltrators inspiring the Great Terror by stressing that this cabal included both citizens and foreigners. Pushkin was recast as a martyr and victim of Tsarist autocracy. Soviet ideologues built on Lermontov’s assertion that the court was responsible for Pushkin’s death, but added in conspiratorial emphasis, which reflected the paranoia of their own age; Pushkin was not just slain by the aristocracy’s rumors, but by a treacherous plot orchestrated by Benckendorff, the Tsar’s lackey, and d’Anthes, the puppet of nefarious foreign powers. This new narrative was intended to accentuate the need for constant vigilance to defend against enemies of the state, those who touted foreign and Trotskyite philosophies. Additionally, it served as a reaffirmation of the necessity of the purges, show trials, and terror, which accompanied the celebrations in 1937. Hunted by similar nefarious forces, Pushkin became the paragon of the new Soviet man who paid with his life to pave the way for the Socialist revolution.

This reading completely ignored many facts of Pushkin’s biography–his aristocratic background, the religious tenor of many of his poems, and his disregard for politics. Yet, because Pushkin had already been cast as the nebulous “embodiment of the Russian soul,” Soviet ideologues were not bound by the historical character of the poet as they reshaped his semiotic

58 Petrone, 115.
significance to accomplish their own agenda. Through this semiotic metamorphosis, Pushkin became a modern sign of national identity, meant to unify the nation through the collective identification of the Soviet state with this figure ringed by enemies. Thus, Ulyanov’s painting became an icon of the 1930s because it so successfully communicated this Soviet reading of the poet’s death, nevertheless, it breaks sharply with what one would traditionally expect from a Socialist Realist piece by portraying Pushkin as a member of the court, a particularly audacious move in the Soviet Union after a decade of class struggle.

Because of the problematic nature of Pushkin’s aristocratic status, most Soviet artists shied away from portraying any of Pushkin’s relationships. Instead the artist was usually depicted alone at his work or pondering in nature. When Pushkin was shown in the company of others, it was often his peasant nurse, who in 1937 was portrayed as a surrogate mother and was credited with teaching Pushkin about the plight of the oppressed classes. Her company was acceptable because it divorced Pushkin from his aristocratic upbringing and tied him to the common man. Other acceptable companions were the Decembrists, whose association gave Pushkin clear revolutionary ties. Images such as Kardovsky’s *Pushkin among the Decembrists at Kamenka* from 1934 (figure 12) showed Pushkin actively supporting the Decembrists by joining in the revolutionaries’ vigorous political debates. For the centenary, Ulyanov actually produced an entire series of sketches depicting Pushkin’s life. Some of these sketches deal with these more conventional Soviet themes (figures 13-15). But it is telling that he did not choose one of these representations for his grand masterwork. Instead, he chose to work up his sketch of Pushkin in the ballroom.

Ulyanov would have likely argued that he chose this image for his large work because it most directly sought to commemorate the fateful February duel against the French officer
d’Anthes. Yet, he departed dramatically from more traditional images of the poet’s demise, such as Adrian Volkov’s *Duel of Pushkin and d’Anthes* (1869) or Alexei Naumov’s *Duel of Pushkin and d’Anthes* (1884), which inspired works such as A. A. Gorbov’s 1937 depiction, *Pushkin’s Duel*, (figures 16-18). These paintings all depicted the poet bleeding in snow while the shadowy figure of the dispassionate d’Anthes lurked in the background. *Pushkin and His Wife at the Ball* replaces the cold disinterested snow with the sweltering heat of the ballroom. The color shifts from cool blues and greys to blazing pinks and golds. Volkov, Naumov, and Gorbov depicted Pushkin in the wide-open space outside the town, tying Pushkin to the land and the nature that he loved, but Ulyanov represented the poet in the city, thronged by the aristocracy and dressed in the court costume he abhorred.

In the Soviet view, Ulyanov’s unique depiction of the tragedy functioned as a moralizing tale on the threat of Europeanization and classed society. By altering the portrayal of Pushkin’s demise, Ulyanov recast the narrative surrounding Pushkin’s death; *Pushkin and his Wife at the Ball* asserts that Pushkin was not simply slain by d’Anthes’ bullet, but was suffocated, as Blok asserted in 1921, by the confines of courtly Petersburg society. The actual duel is only hinted at obliquely through the prominent bicorn and the removed glove held by the grimacing man in the bottom right corner (figure 19). This gauntlet waiting to be thrown down signifies the fatal duel, and tellingly, it is held beneath the Napoleonic hat. Few events in Russian history have seized the national consciousness more potently than the 1812 War for the Fatherland, when all of Russia united to beat back a hostile, foreign intrusion onto Russian soil. Thus, this sartorial reference to the invasion would have been read, not only as a reference to d’Anthes’ Frenchness, but, as a suggestion of the sinister involvement of foreign powers in Pushkin’s demise. D’Anthes himself stands four figures behind the man holding the bicorn (figure 20-21). Dressed in red frippery, he
seems reminiscent of a matador suggesting that he was a pawn and distraction, who goaded Pushkin to rush headlong into the trap set by colluding powers.

Standing beside d’Anthes, the woman in white is marked by the blue bow on her right shoulder as a lady-in-waiting, a reference to Natalya Pushkina’s aunt, Yekaterina Zagryazhskaya (figure 22-23), who continuously argued against Pushkin’s entreaties for his family to leave the city; she was blamed for convincing Natalya that her charms would be utterly wasted in the dull country atmosphere. The prominent blue bow not only identifies her, but also stresses her courtly connections suggesting that this scheme was directed by the nefarious Tsar, the ultimate enemy of the people.

While the Tsar is not pictured, the figure in front of Zagryazhshaya, Count Benckendorff (figure 24-25), hints at his involvement. In 1826, when Pushkin was released from his exile and met with the Tsar, Nikolai I had foretold a brilliant career for the poet and promised to be his personal censor. Pushkin hoped for a life free from the demanding constraints of censorship and filled with travel, but Benckendorff, the head of Nikolai I’s secret police soon informed him that the Tsar was so forgiving. On the Tsar’s orders, Benckendorff kept Pushkin on surveillance and served as the Tsar’s proxy in censoring Pushkin’s work. All messages between the Tsar and his troublesome poet were communicated through Benckendorf. Because of his position as imperial liason, Benckendorf could be seeing the Soviet viewing as indexical of Nikolai I, the ultimate enemy of the people, but he was more closely tied to Pushkin’s death than the Tsar himself. Shortly before the duel, one of Pushkin’s friends forwarded Benckendorff the inflammatory letter they had received and warned him that they feared what the poet might do to defend his honor. Yet Benckendorff decided not to act to prevent the tragedy. In later conceptions of Pushkin’s death, Benckendorff had essentially murdered Pushkin by choosing not to intervene,
and in the more paranoid Soviet interpretations, his lack of action suggested that he had been cognizant of a greater plot and perhaps even one of the mastermind behind its execution.

By communicating this idea that aristocratic society as a whole had killed Alexander Pushkin, Ulyanov’s painting reads as an allegory on the plight of Russia; just as this aristocratic, Europeanized society had colluded to stifle Russia’s greatest poet, Russia had been repressed by European traditions for too long. This painting perfectly reflected the xenophobic tendencies of Soviet foreign policies of the Great Retreat,60 which, in 1937, were nearing their apex. While foreign policy of the 1920s had focused on spreading socialism across the globe, in the 1930s Soviet leaders decided that Russia and her affiliated republics in the USSR, would divorce themselves from Europe and create a new identity built on a mixture of working-class and uniquely Russian ideals. Pushkin was raised as the icon of the beginnings of this Russian cultural identity, which now culminated in the Socialist Realist style. While Soviet leaders rhetorically emphasized throwing off the shackles of European cultural bondage, Ulyanov’s work made Pushkin a martyr and visually indicted Europeanized society in his murder. This concept of the individual at odds with society was a central tenet of dialectical materialism—a foundational philosophical premise of Socialist Realism, which puts this painting in line with dominant Soviet discourse. Nevertheless, Ulyanov questioned the ultimate synthesis under Communism and thus

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60 The term Great Retreat was coined by Nicholas Timasheff in his book, *The Great Retreat: The Growth and Decline of Communism in Russia*. While recent scholars have questioned the legitimacy of this periodization, the term remains popular in describing Soviet foreign and domestic policy in the second half of the 1930s. Soviet policy makers abandoned the more radical ideals of communism and began to focus on traditional values. The drive to convert the world to socialism was replaced by increased focus on strengthening domestic loyalty to the party. Cultural unity became increasingly important, and the USSR abandoned the multivocality of Lenin’s dictum “national in form, socialist in content” in favor of a new nationalistic style unified across the Soviets by a new subservience to Great Russian culture. The concept of the Great Retreat is particularly pertinent to the discussion of art in the Soviet Union, as Timasheff’s timeline matches well with the rise of Socialist Realism and the rejection of Constructivist, Suprematist, and other avant-garde styles, which had vied for supremacy at the beginning of the Soviet experiment.
embedded dissention in his depiction of the individual at odds with society by subverting the dominant discourse of the time.

THE DIALECTICS OF SOCIALIST REALISM

Boris Groys remarked in his seminal work, *Gesamtkunstwerk Stalin*, that to fully understand Socialist Realism, one must have “mastered Soviet dialectical thinking,” which is to say that Socialist Realism itself relied on the contradictions of dialectics to give it meaning. The Soviet iteration of dialectics was known as dialectical materialism and originated in the writings of Marx and Engels. Born from the Hegelian concept of dialectics with the thesis, antithesis, and synthesis, Marx and Engels’ dialectical materialism argued that history was made up of conflicts between different elements in opposition, and these conflicts, in turn, led to growth through certain deterministic laws; communism was the ultimate synthesis that would bring all these conflicts into harmony. While Lenin and Stalin embraced the essentials of Marx and Engels’ dialectical materialism, they softened the deterministic edge to create a uniquely Bolshevik position that the whole of humanity would not rise up, and this idyllic future would not be brought to fruition, without enlightened individuals leading the way. Thus, one of the important dialectics of Soviet dialectical materialism became the social/individual dialectic.

In the 1930s, this struggle between the individual and society replaced class struggle as an emphasized theme in Soviet culture and became one of the key characteristics of newly

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developing style of Socialist Realism.\(^64\) Soviet historians lauded historical figures that had rebelled against the societies in which they lived in order to move civilization on to its Socialist destiny. The heroes of Stalinist literature struggled under the injustices of societal corruption until they found resolution by helping to reform society and, ideally, implement Communism. Artists, likewise, were entreated to depict “social conflict in a broadly ‘realistic’ way” in order to conform to the demands of dialectical materialism.\(^65\) Ulyanov’s painting was celebrated as a successful piece of Socialist Realism because it portrayed the struggle between the individual Pushkin and the court society so well, as previously discussed.

Ulyanov’s piece also referenced another dialectic—that of past and present. Soviet painting had a complicated relationship with linear time. History painting, once the zenith of the traditional European academic hierarchy of genres, was relatively rare in the Soviet Union, particularly any paintings depicting events from before the revolution. The “kartina,” large-scale genre scenes depicting Soviet life, topped a new hierarchy of genres. These huge paintings glorified the work of the common man and showed the happiness enjoyed by the collective in the new Socialist state.

While it may be posited that history painting had fallen out of favor because it was seen as decadent and traitorous to celebrate the past, it is more likely that history painting was generally seen as irrelevant. In the Soviet system, according to the theory of reflection, art was to not only depict reality, but it was to shape reality; as Groy’s points out, “The artist’s involvement

\(^{64}\)Clark, 15-24.

\(^{65}\) Ibid, 122.; One of the other important dialectics that dominated Socialist Realist art was the conflict between the real and the ideal. Lenin and Lunacharsky addressed this conflict as part of the theory of reflection, which stated that art was to be used as a process of cognition to educate the masses by showing them something real that they could relate to, while also advocating a reality better than the current actuality. This gave rise to Socialist Realism’s insistence on a naturalistic depiction of a present/future moment that everyone knew contradicted reality and yet accepted as an image of the end result of communism. Much more has been written about the effect of the theory of reflection on art, as in Bown’s book cited here, but little has been said about the consciousness/spontaneity dialectic in Soviet art, particularly the way in which it might facilitate dissention.
in the shaping of reality within a unitary, collectively executed project precluded ‘disinterested’ contemplation.” Thus, purely reflective history painting, which had been practiced by artists such as the Blue Rose Group, was considered frivolous because it did not further the progression of socialism. In the kartina, artists could play an active role in shaping the new socialist future, by portraying that idyllic future as a fact of the present, creating “the illusion of instantaneous progress.” These monumental paintings became visual depictions of Stalin’s 1936 declaration that “Socialism is Built!” —implying the already achieved success of a process that was still underway. This confluence of present and future arose from the deterministic principles of dialectical materialism. Following the Soviet logic, socialism was already achieved because it was predetermined by the laws of historical materialism developed by Marx and Engels—thus linear time had been superseded. Groys states, “Socialist Realism...regards historical time as ended and therefore occupies no particular place in it...they were in an intermediate phase of evolution whose final phase was already assured, this intermediate phase served as prototype and symbol of the final phase.” Since history had been transcended by the triumph of socialism, history painting was merely an echo of an outmoded system. Since the previous system had been declared effete, history painting had nothing to celebrate—it could only rage against the oppression suffered by those geniuses that had lived before the advent of the socialist state.

Thus in the 1930s, Ulyanov’s piece was read as an image of past struggles which had been transcended by the revolution. This reading implied that if Pushkin had lived in the Soviet

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66Groys, 38.
68Because of the negative view of history painting, in order to truly celebrate Pushkin, some artists for the 1937 centenary such as Petrov-Vodkin and Gustav Klutsis brought Pushkin into the modern age. While this approach completely ignored the realities of Pushkin as a historical figure, it allowed for the creation of pieces that could truly celebrate, not that man, but the position that the idea of Pushkin held in the Soviet consciousness.
Union, his individuality would not have been in conflict with society, and he would have found perfect harmony in advancing himself as an individual by building society’s new socialist utopia.

Thus critics considered *Pushkin and his Wife at the Ball* a triumph of Socialist Realism because the painting depicted both the temporal and social dialectics, which arose from dialectical materialism. Soviet scholars lauded Ulyanov’s ability to gaze into the psychology of the individual repressed by the Tsarist regime and give the multifaceted view of timeless conflict that Soviet cultural ideologues demanded. Pushkin was separated from the throng of aristocratic onlookers by the frame of the mirror, showing that he was a man apart—a man in whom the drive towards the new social order had been planted. Pushkin’s gaze outward was seen as a prophetic gaze, which saw the coming of socialism. Meanwhile, the society pictured in Ulyanov’s piece while directly implicating the imperial court in the death of Pushkin, also warned against all those conniving against the bright future of Socialism which Pushkin had foretold, a sentiment that resonated deeply with calls for constant vigilance against enemies of the state that marked the era of the Great Terror.

Yet, while Ulyanov was celebrated for depicting the conflict between the individual and society and contrasting past and present, these same dialectics allow for a subversive reading of the portrait. The Soviet reading was built on the premise that history had been transcended by the advent of socialism and that these conflicting dialectics were destined to be resolved by the great synthesis of communism. But if an artist could question those assumptions, then a painting about historical conflicts could become seditiously pertinent to his own society. Ulyanov uses the old, Russian tradition of the Aesopian method to reflect historical conflicts onto his own time, thereby activating a secondary meaning for the dialectics that were so highly praised by contemporary critics.
THE AESOPIAN METHOD

The Aesopian method is a well-known Russian literary device, developed by Russian authors to combat centuries of tight censorship. Lev Losseff defines Aesopian language as “a special literary system, one whose structure allows interaction between author and reader at the same time that it conceals inadmissible content from the censor.”69 Like the English term “doublespeak,” the Aesopian method refers to communication that has two simultaneous meanings—one tailored to fit the political exigencies of the time and another hidden between the lines, which subverts the first. However, there is an important differentiation between the Aesopian method and doublespeak. In political theory, doublespeak describes politicians’ use of ambiguous or euphemistic language in order to get their audience to swallow messages that otherwise would have been rejected; for example imprisonment in the Gulag and censorship were referred to as “reeducation” and “control of anti-Soviet propaganda.” Aesopian language is essentially the inverse of “doublespeak” and refers to political critique, which passes censorship because the writing superficially seems to conform to the prescriptions of the censor.

Coined in the 1860s by the Russian writer Mikhail Saltykov-Schedrin,70 the term was introduced to the West by dissatisfied Soviet writers, who after emigrating from the Soviet Union, described their own attempts at subversion within the Soviet system as Aesopian. One

69 Loseff, Lev. *On the Beneficence of Censorship: Aesopian Language in Modern Russian Literature*. Vol. 31. Arbeiten Und Texte Zur Slavistik. München: Verlag Otto Sagner in Kommission, 1984, x. This book was one of the first texts to critically examine the aesthetics of Aesopian language in modern Russian literature. Earlier works had mostly been produced in Russia and as such were limited by censorship. While Aesopian language prior to the Revolution had been investigated extensively, and most writers were aware that the technique was still in use, scholars writing about the Aesopian method did not want to implicate living authors and subject them to potentially deadly consequences by unmasking the techniques of their subversion. Even Loseff was very careful only to cite the works of writers who had either already been discovered or who had emigrated from the Soviet Union. Loseff argues that Aesopian language is not just a necessity of an oppressed people, but that it actually has aesthetic value and that tight censorship has actually caused writers and readers to develop this complex language to communicate subversive ideas.

such writer, Anatolii Kuznetsov, refers to this as the Aesopian method, as a way of presenting a moral obscured by metaphors and allegories so it is not immediately evident, asserts that “in no other literature is this device so prevalent as in the Soviet literature, and at no time in history has the ability to speak or read between the lines, which many Russians learn in their early childhood, been developed to such a fine art as in the USSR.” He admits that his own book, Babi Yar, which depicted the horrors of Nazi occupation in Ukraine during the second World War, was read by censors as a celebration of the indomitable spirit of the Soviet people, when it also carried with it an indictment of dictatorship not only in Nazi controlled Ukraine, but also in the Soviet Union of the 1950s when the book was published. Another writer, Arkadi Belikov, suggested a common trick in the Soviet Union “was to put something in a historical context” because you could say as many uncomplimentary things as you wanted about Pericles or Nikolai I and hope your readers could draw the analogy to their own time.

The functionality of the Aesopian mode relies upon the semiotic concept of pragmatics; reacting against Saussurian semiotic theory, which treats signs as existing in abstract space, pragmatics asserts that signs have an inherent ambiguity, and that speakers rely upon context and shared understanding to interpret not only the sign, but the sign within various contexts. The Aesopian method relies upon the shifting meaning of signs in different contexts to conceal its subversive meaning from censors, while disclosing additional layers to clued-in readers. As Belikov suggested, historical accounts lent themselves to Aesopian language because, as discussed above, most censors regarded history as irrelevant to the socialist present and thus did

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72 Ibid, 15.
73 Andreas H. Jucker and Irma Taavitsainen. Historical Pragmatics (Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton, 2010), 5.
not look for any correlation between the historical situation and contemporary realities. However, even one small phrase could invite a reader to look for contemporary analogues.

Aesopian language is well documented in the Russian literary tradition, but as yet it is unexplored in the visual arts of Socialist Realism. I assert that Nikolai Ulyanov, and other artists at the time, would have recognized these same subversive methods and used history painting in an Aesopian mode, in order to present their own unique message. Nikolai Ulyanov likely would have been particularly aware of the theory of Aesopian language, because he was well contented with not only the artistic intelligentsia, but his studio was often frequented by writers and dramaturges as well. Because Pushkin’s semiotic meaning was already multifaceted and only made even more ambiguous by the 1937 celebration, Ulyanov’s grand painting was a natural outlet for his subversive commentary.

Ulyanov was not the only one to avail himself of the inherent ambiguity of Pushkin as sign in 1937, and censors were not unaware of this phenomenon. It was, in fact, generally acknowledged that Pushkin himself had been a master of Aesopian language, using the tyranny of Ivan the Terrible or the Jacobin dictatorship to highlight the problems of Nikolai I’s autocracy.74 Both of Ulyanov’s former employers, Konstantin Stanislavsky and Vsevolod Meyerhold, had productions of Pushkin’s historical play “Boris Godunov” in their repertoires for the centenary celebration cancelled by censors for fear that the messages of the play, which had been intended as a subversive critique of Nikolai I’s reign, would call into question the legitimacy of Stalinist authority.75

However, others managed to circumvent censorship through careful manipulation of their discourse. In writing about the Pushkin Centenary, Petrone identified a consistent thread of

74 Petrone, 141.
75 Ibid, 142.
subversion in the essays of E. N. Cherniavskii, published in honor of the centenary from 1936-1938. Cherniavskii often used the clichés of the 1930s to couch his subversion beneath a mask of glorification of the regime. For example, Cherniavskii used the common Soviet phraseology “and only in our day,” which was used to set in opposition the glorious era of socialist victory against the oppressive Tsarist past, when he said “and only in our day, in the day of the victory of socialism and the Stalin Constitution...do the torment and the quest of this poet of genius become understandable.”\textsuperscript{76} To those who had imbibed the Socialist dogma and slogans, this quotation would seem to laud the Soviet system for having freed artists of the onus they carried in Tsarist times; but to those who looked beyond the clichéd meaning, the phrase expressed the idea that only in 1937, when writers were again subject to extreme oppression, could they personally understand Pushkin’s struggle with censorship under Nikolai I. Even in this short phrase, Cherniavskii is activating dichotomous communal and individual readings to enact his subversion. This dichotomy, as previously addressed, had already been a part of Pushkin’s semiotic significance, but it acquired new potency as Socialist Realism, the product of the 1930s, moved away from the complete denial of the individual and argued that with the “victory of the socialist system”\textsuperscript{77} the dialectic of individual and society had been superseded and socialism had brought them into complete harmony. This expectation of a stark contrast between past and present created an institutional blind spot which facilitated subversion through the use of the Aesopian method.

Ulyanov’s painting, \textit{Pushkin and his Wife at the Ball}, like Cherniavskii’s writing, plays on the expectation of contrast between past and present. Soviet ideologues lauded the portrait as a portrayal of the psychological tragedy of an artist repressed by the tyrannical tsarist regime.

\textsuperscript{76} Ibid, 144.
\textsuperscript{77} Искусство, 1937, no. 6, 1, Cited in Petrone, 144.
They could not see any reflection of their own society in this depiction of tragedy, because they assumed a different outcome if Pushkin had lived under Soviet rule; according to contemporary rhetoric, the new social order would have allowed him to thrive and he would have been honored commensurate to his greatness. Yet, Ulyanov intended for artists and other members of the intelligentsia to recognize the irony in that assumption, and left visual and literary clues to enlighten his target audience as to his subversive reading.

In writing about his series of Pushkin sketches, Ulyanov leaves clues regarding the subversive nature of his portrait. Responding to criticism that the portrait failed to capture the poet’s likeness, Ulyanov argued his goal was the “synthesis of the outer and inner “I” of Pushkin…[to] call forth some emotions of distrust.”78 Similar to Cherniavskii, he continued by alluding to the unique point of view of the modern Soviet artist, saying, “An artist of our time … must at least remember that few contemporaries of the poet understood the tragedy of Pushkin. His difficult personal image eclipsed the more important image of the poet—the servant of Apollo.”79 Thus Ulyanov hinted that his goal was not the faithful replication of the appearance of the person, Alexander Pushkin, but an expression of the more general idea of the artist. Ulyanov hints at his subversion by underscoring that only an oppressed Soviet artist could truly comprehend Pushkin’s tragically confined position, and he asserts, in response to the criticism of his depiction, that the inner psychology of the tormented artist outweighed the historical appearance of Pushkin.

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78 Ульянов, 84.
79 Ibid, 85.
For years, Ulyanov had focused on painting psychologically insightful portraits of creative personalities, and he felt that his place was at the center of artistic life in Moscow. He shared his studio with writers, poets, playwrights, dramaturges, and other artistic personalities. Many of the Russian Symbolists with whom Ulyanov had associated in his earlier days had emphasized the unity of the arts, and Ulyanov adopted a persona of the ultimate artist who expressed his creativity through music, writing, and drama as well as the visual arts. By insisting his portrait was intended to capture the view of Pushkin as “servant of Apollo,” Ulyanov highlights Pushkin’s role not only as a poet, but as an artist, and he opens the door for parallels between Pushkin’s artistic suppression and his own, despite the difference in their mediums.

The idea that Ulyanov saw himself reflected in Pushkin is supported by a later section in his essay on his relationship with the poet, which builds upon the idea that only Soviet artists could truly comprehend Pushkin’s doomed position. Ulyanov described how the chronology of events in Pushkin’s life fascinated him, and he concludes his comments by saying:

To me, it seemed that in the variety and difficulties of this life’s collisions I more correctly understand Pushkin. If in the early period of his biography, Pushkin interested me as a freedom-loving personality, a poet of indomitable life force, then in the final period, tied with a higher world, he seemed a person already tragically doomed.

Completing this painting in the twilight of his own life, Ulyanov had passed through his own “freedom-loving” experiments with Cubism and symbolism to an age when he too was “tied to a higher world” and “tragically doomed” by the stroke he had suffered just two years previous.

After the stroke, Ulyanov’s commercial artistic career was put on hold. He became much more

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80 Interestingly, Ulyanov had included Pushkin’s death mask in the background of a portrait of the symbolist poet Vyacheslav Ivanov, to symbolize the history and heritage of the symbolist movement in Russia. The portrait has a sinister, macabre feeling in keeping with the often dour outlook of the Russian symbolists. In this context, rather than celebrating Pushkin as the forefather of their movement, Pushkin’s death mask becomes the ominous ghost of Alexander Pushkin haunting his followers.
81 Правоверовой, 6.
82 Ibid, 84.
reflective; two great endeavors ruled his life—his memoirs and the Pushkin cycle. While Ulyanov avoided discussing the “difficulties” and “collisions” of his life in his memoir, the exercise of revisiting his pleasant memories of the 1910s must have highlighted all the friends, freedom, and fame that he had lost through the 1920s and 30s. Not only did Ulyanov’s essay imply a kinship in suffering between the artist and the poet he depicted, but Ulyanov cleverly suggested that relationship visually in his painting by alluding to Pushkin’s self-portraits, as well as his own.

The view of Pushkin presented in Pushkin and his Wife at the Ball deviates from the common three-quarter view and opts instead for a strict profile in order to align itself with Pushkin’s own self-portraits. Pushkin, known for his marginalia and doodling, drew himself over and over again. These sketches are very stylized, and they vary significantly (figure 26), thus they are not thought to realistically depict the poet’s appearance. But several attributes are shared by the vast majority of these small doodles. Pushkin is always depicted in profile with a sloping forehead and nose, and usually with dark, dramatic sideburns. Ulyanov’s portrait of Pushkin replicates all of these characteristics. His citation of Pushkin’s self-portraits in this work accounts for how such an accomplished portraitist could have his opus criticized because it did not resemble the figure it was meant to depict.

Ulyanov further highlights this idea of the painting as a self-portrait by the inclusion of the mirror. In a historical context, the scene depicted in the portrait is completely improbable with the Pushkins ignoring the grand staircase full of people and instead fully turning their bodies towards the mirror. Furthermore, the perspective depicted in the mirror indicates that this

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83 The one notable exception to the generally rosy view Ulyanov paints of his life is the description of the poverty of his peasant origins, which, of course, played into the political narrative of the artist whose talent was stifled by poverty and religion until saved by the Soviet system. While Ulyanov had been plucked from his position as an icon painter long before the revolution, he carefully describes how it was compassion for a fellow poor boy from Yelts that inspired his savior, Meshkov, and thereby implies a proletariat camaraderie in keeping with Soviet ideals.
mirror is very near to the foot of the staircase, suggesting an improbably narrow and awkward landing for such a grandiose entrance. Some references to this painting title it, *A. S. Pushkin and His Wife, N. N. Pushkina at the Anichkov Palace*, giving a specific physical location for the image. The impossibility of the depicted space becomes even more apparent when Ulyanov’s painting is compared with S. K. Zaryanko’s painting, *The Parade Staircase of the Anichkov Palace* (figure 27). While the angle of the staircase is somewhat less dramatic, the reddish carpet going up the middle of the staircase and the suggestion of columns in the background clearly suggest this entrance to the imperial palace. But, Zaryanko’s interior scene makes it apparent that there is no place for a mirror such as Ulyanov depicts.

Ulyanov chooses to break with reality in order to draw a parallel to his own works, most notably his famous *Self-Portrait at the Hairdresser’s* (figure 28). At the height of his experiments with cubo-futurist stylization on his travels around Europe, Ulyanov had completed a series of paintings depicting mirrors, such as *In the I* (figure 29) and other reflective surfaces, as in *Parisian Shop Windows* (figure 30). These became some of his most famous paintings outside of his portrait works, and the series culminated with his self-portrait. By including the mirror in his portrait of Pushkin, Ulyanov makes reference to these experimental paintings and the style that he had been forced to abandon in favor of a more realistic rendering. This further suggests a reading of this painting as a self-portrait, inviting viewers to look for parallels between the confined position of Pushkin and the restricted life of the artist, Ulyanov.

The mirror further underscores this Aesopian reflexiveness through the double frame. The frame of the mirror depicted within the picture plane seems to echo the frame of the painting. With Pushkin’s gaze directed outward and making eye contact with the viewer, the
painting itself seems to take on a mirror-like presence. One scholar, Johnathan Brooks Platt, describes the effect thusly:

In the reality of the exhibition space, it is the viewer who meets [Pushkin’s] gaze. From this perspective, the image in the mirror becomes a recessed second painting, and Pushkin’s contemptuous look becomes a knowing, communicative glance toward his Soviet ‘contemporaries.’

While Platt recognizes that Pushkin’s gaze signals a shared understanding between Pushkin and the viewer, he completely misconstrues the empathetic glance by interpreting it only as censors likely would have, as an invitation to join Pushkin in condemning the corruption and folly of court life. Platt’s insight has been dulled by his acceptance of the same Soviet expectations that shielded Ulyanov’s subversive message from the scrutiny of his contemporaries. Decades of repetitive, cursory scholarship on this work as well as strict expectations for Stalinist art have institutionalized this single reading.

Yet, when regarded in light of Ulyanov’s biography and his writings on his Pushkin composition, this shared glance between the historical figure and his modern audience becomes an acknowledgement of a common experience of repression. In this reading, the mirror gives visual form to the Aesopian invitation to look for elements of the present reflected in the historical events depicted. While Soviet censors reflected on the tragedy of Pushkin’s historical position, Ulyanov’s “breadcrumb” trail would have suggested to those of the intelligentsia—those familiar with his work and well acquainted with Pushkin’s forays into artistic depiction—that Pushkin understood the plight of the repressed artist.

One figure in the scene further suggests an Aesopian reading. The hooknose, flabby jowls, and balding head identify the portly character in the mirror to Pushkin’s left as the famous

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nineteenth-century dramaturge, Prince Alexander Shakhovsky (1777-1846) (figure 31). This connection between Pushkin and the theater further underscores the similarities between the poet and the painter, who had worked for many years at the Moscow Art Theater in association with Stanislavsky, the greatest dramatist of his own era. But even more significantly, Shakhovsky was famous for lampooning revered figures and institutions of his own time. Perhaps Ulyanov’s inclusion of this renowned satirist, implies that he too sought to critique his contemporaries. Intellectuals familiar with Shakhovsky’s work might have noticed and begun to look for a secondary meaning in this historical piece.

In this Aesopian reading, the depiction of the tragedy of Pushkin’s suffocation in the court of Nikolai I comes to symbolize Ulyanov’s suffering in the stifling artistic climate of his own time. While the Aesopian method does not lay out specific equivalencies, it does invite viewers to draw parallels. Thus, the figures gazing out of the mirror not only represent historic personages, but can be seen to symbolize confining elements in Ulyanov’s own life. Benckendorff’s watchful gaze, which tellingly focuses not on Pushkin but pierces the picture plane to rest on the viewer, embodies contemporary Soviet censorship, which had caused the artist to abandon the more experimental styles he loved. The imposing form of Zagryazhshaya, who kept Pushkin trapped in the capital when he wanted to escape to the country, could personify increasing Soviet restrictions on travel, which isolated Ulyanov from the developments of European Modernism and his former friends who had fled the country. D’Anthes’ uniformed figure and the threat of his pistols suggests the institutionalized violence, which drove the Great Terror. Together these figures express the imperiled position of the creative intellectual in the Soviet Union at this time when the artistic restrictions of Socialist Realism were tightening,
creative impulses were being smothered, and the shadow of any ideological deviance could be fatal.\footnote{Nikolai Ivanovich Mikhailov’s sketch of Stalin and Lenin included a shadow behind them which some interpreted as a skeleton or symbol of death. In 1937, he was arrested, tried, convicted as an enemy of the state, and executed. A section in \textit{Socialist Realist Painting} describes this incident in detail and mentions many other artists who became victims of Stalinist Terror, such as Petr Kiselis, Aleksandr Grigorev, Georgi Lavrov, Konstantin rMaksimov, Roman Semashkevich, Mikhail Sokolov, Vladimir Timirev, Grigori Filippov, Leonid Nikitin. Bown’s short summary of artists exiled, shot, and imprisoned shows how following Soviet ideological and stylistic prescriptions was no longer desirable, but vitally necessary. Bown, Matthew Cullerne. 1998. \textit{Socialist Realist Painting}. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. 201-203.}

However, perhaps one of the most potent symbols of the denigrated position of the artist was Pushkin’s uniform. Ulyanov portrays Pushkin not in the Romantic styles he loved, but in his court attire—the cadet uniform he hated. This is unprecedented in portraits of Pushkin, who was always portrayed in typical dark Romantic era dress or occasionally in the uniform of the Lyceum, as in Repin’s piece. This was done to respect the wishes of the poet, who found the rank of camera cadet\footnote{The title of this rank came from the German \textit{kammerjunker} and has been translated variously as junior gentleman of the chamber, junior chamberlain, valet de chamber, and groom of the chamber.} so disparaging that he made his wife vow that she would flout the traditions of the court and have him buried in a civilian’s coat instead of his court uniform.\footnote{Binyon, 607.}

Nevertheless, Ulyanov disregards this artistic custom and displays the despised uniform so prominently that some references to the painting title the work \textit{A. S. Pushkin in the Camera Cadet’s Uniform}. The accuracy of Ulyanov’s depiction and the affront this costume afforded can be measured by regarding Karl Piratski’s \textit{War Room 1812 in the Winter Palace} (figure 32) which depicts the same exact uniform Pushkin is wearing in the Soviet portrait on twelve-year-old boys. This uniform, which Pushkin felt symbolized a demeaning lack of respect for his genius, became a symbol for Ulyanov’s own frustrations. The artist had often expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of recognition he received from AkhR and Soviet artistic leaders; he felt he had
been forgotten, when he should have been celebrated as one of the great Soviet artists.\footnote{Правоверовой, 10.} Moreover, if Pushkin is to be read, as Ulyanov suggests in his essay as symbol for “the servant of Apollo,”\footnote{Ульянов, 85.} then this costume, which was forced upon Pushkin to please the Tsar, could symbolize the stylistic prescriptions, the ideological regulations, the directives on content, the censorship, and quotas–all that the authoritarian regime of Ulyanov’s own time imposed upon their own artists. Thus, by suggesting a kinship with the historical figure of Pushkin, Ulyanov invites those of his own class–the artists, the writers, the dramaturges, and other creative individuals–to ponder how the state has constrained and suffocated their creative genius. Ulyanov subverts the efforts of the Soviet regime to contrast their era with the unenlightened Tsarist period, and suggests instead that, the mirror of history reveals a damning comparison.

**CONCLUSION**

*A.S. Pushkin and his Wife at the Ball* has been traditionally praised for its insight into the tortured mind of the poet shortly before his death. As this thesis has demonstrated, Ulyanov’s insight should not only be read as the product of historical study and socialist outrage at the injustice of the past, but as an expression of the painter’s own angst as a stifled artist. This portraitist sacrificed his former style and associations in order to reinvent himself as the ideal Soviet painter, and yet he still had not achieved the acclaim he so craved. He seized upon the opportunity to express his dissatisfaction with the system that had failed him, even though an overt display of such criticism could have cost him his life. As writers had done before him, Ulyanov couched his critique in the guise of a historical commentary leaving only subtle clues so as to evade detection by the censor. By making use of the inherent dialectical contradictions of
Socialist Realism, Ulyanov was able to produce a work, which was heralded as a triumph, and yet he subverted and questioned the style it was supposed to embody.

It seems unlikely that Ulyanov would have been the only artist to avail himself of the opportunity to use history painting in this manner. Because Socialist Realism valued the idealized, forward-looking kartina over images of a meaningless past, history painting has been largely ignored by the academic community. And yet, that same focus on the ascendant genre occurred in Soviet times; censors would have been focused on the more valued “kartinas” and political portraits. Because history painting was seen as merely a record of the flawed past, which had been overcome by Socialism, censors were not as rigorous in their examinations and were likely blinded by their own assumptions. This institutional negligence would have made history painting a sanctuary for artists with subversive messages. I believe further investigations into this genre will reveal how artists living under Stalinist repression found alternative means to express their nonconformity. While the 1930s has generally been characterized as the height of Socialist Realist conformity, it was also the apogee of artistic suppression. This tightening of stylistic and ideological constrains would have been particularly aggravating for the artists of Ulyanov’s generation, who had known the artistic freedom of the Russian Silver Age and who had engaged with the modernist styles popular in Europe in the 1910s, but who had remained in the Soviet Union. Many of these artists, such as Mikhail Nesterov (1862-1942), Kuzma Petrov-Vodkin (1878-1939), and Pavel Korin (1892-1962), turned to less carefully scrutinized genres in this period, including portraiture, artistic restorations, and history painting. I believe that further investigations into the biographies and works of these artists will reveal how artists participating in the Soviet system and honored by the Soviet Union were able to quietly express dissent without losing their careers, their homeland, or their lives. I hope that this will invite a
reevaluation of Stalinist art, allowing Socialist Realism to transcend the customary view of the style as merely a propagandistic apparatus of the Soviet state by encouraging greater investigations into how individual artists expressed themselves while navigating a hostile artistic environment.
Figure 1: Ulyanov, Nikolai, *A. S. Pushkin and his Wife, N. N. Pushkina, at the Imperial Ball*, 1937
Figure 2: Kiprensky, Orest, *Portrait of Alexander Pushkin*, 1827

Figure 3: Tropinin, Vasily, *Portrait of Alexander Pushkin*, 1827
Figure 4: Ulyanov, Nikolai, *Napoleon's Ambassador Lauriston in the Tent of Kutuzov*, 1945

Figure 5: Ulyanov, Nikolai, *K. S. Stanislavsky at Work*, 1947
Figure 6: Photograph of Ulyanov, around 1937

Figure 7: Ulyanov, Nikolai, *Sketch for Pushkin and His Wife in the Mirror*, 1927
Figure 8: Ulyanov, Nikolai, *Sketch for Pushkin and His Wife at the Ball*, 1935

Figure 9: Kravchenko, Alexei, *Pushkin*, 1936
Figure 10: Repin, Ilya, *A. Pushkin in the Lyceum on January 8, 1815 Reads His Poem 'Memories' at Tsarskoe Selo*, 1911

Figure 11: Lanceray, Eugene, *Empress Elizabeth Petrovna in Tsarskoye Selo*, 1905
Figure 12: Kadrovsky, Dmitri, *Pushkin among the Decembrists at Kamenka*, 1934

Figure 13: Ulyanov, Nikolai, *Pushkin at Work*, about 1936
Figure 14: Ulyanov, Nikolai, *Pushkin at Boldino*, about 1936

Figure 15: Ulyanov, Nikolai, *Pushkin with his Nanny*, about 1936
Figure 16: Volkov, Adrian, *Duel of Pushkin and d'Anthes*, 1869

Figure 17: Naumov, Alexei, *Duel of Pushkin and d'Anthes*, 1884
Figure: Gorbov, A. A., *A. S. Pushkin's Duel with G. d'Anthes*, 1937
Figure 18: Detail 1 from *A. S. Pushkin and his Wife, N. N. Pushkina, at the Imperial Ball*
Figure 19: Detail 2 from *A. S. Pushkin and his Wife, N. N. Pushkina, at the Imperial Ball*

Figure 20: Unknown, *Georges Charles de Heeckeren d'Anthes, 1830*
Figure 21: Detail 3 of *A. S. Pushkin and his Wife, N. N. Pushkina at the Imperial Ball*

Figure 22: Briullov, Alexander Pavlovich, *Portrait of Yekaterina Ivanovna Zagryazhskaya*, 1830
Figure 23: Detail 4 from *A. S. Pushkin and his Wife, N. N. Pushkina, at the Imperial Ball*

Figure 24: Dawe, George, *Alexander von Benckendorff*, 1821
Figure 25: Pushkin Alexander, *Self-portraits*, various times
Figure 26: Zaryanko, Sergei K, *The Parade Staircase of the Anichkov Staircase*, late 19th century
Figure 27: Ulyanov, Nikolai, *Self-Portrait at the Hairdresser’s*, 1918

Figure 28: Ulyanov, Nikolai, *In the Cafe*, 1917
Figure 29: Ulyanov, Nikolai, *Parisian Shop Windows*, 1917

Figure 30: Unknown, *A. A. Shakhovskoy*, 1839
Figure 31: Piratsky, Karl, *War Room 1812 in the Winter Palace*, 1861


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